

MIT SEIFE UND GABELN ERMITTLUNGEN ZUM GLÜCK

Herausgegeben von
data | Auftrag für parasitäre* Gastarbeit

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Impressum / Dank

MIT SEIFE UND GABELN

EINE AUSSTELLUNG ZUM GLÜCK	Poster
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INTERVIEW WITH

EDWARD WRIGHT**TANJA TRAMPE** Which aspects of happiness does your work take up?

EDWARD WRIGHT When I looked at your diagram, I noticed that all the words on the outside are relevant to me [dialogue, ambivalence, dependency, uncertainty, truth, constraint, fear, friendship], because they are all aspects of how we feel within our relationships. I can say my work is about human relationships and how personal relationships create political meaning or events. Or vice versa: how the political atmosphere creates tension or stress within personal relationships. I try not to be too literal. I try to be as vague as possible. Partly in order to allow myself freedom, so that I don't have to comply with some constraints in my subject matter.

I am interested in happiness because it is what we aspire to in our relationships. I do have a tendency to work with opposites: happiness and sadness, aggression and tenderness, anger and peacefulness or calmness. I don't know why I have been so drawn to those kinds of antitheses but I guess they are just very apparent to me. As is ambivalence, which seems intrinsic to any human relationship. The double-sided nature of all of our interactions, all of our feelings. The fact that almost anything that we do or feel or think can be interpreted. It is not clear even to ourselves what we really mean a lot of the time.

I feel my own ambivalence and vagueness to be a very prominent feature of my personality. Perhaps that is why I am so interested in this subject matter and make the work I do. But in order to avoid being solipsistic I try to make my work, at least on some level, approach the "political" sphere. To avoid being personal in a general sense, not only to avoid it being about me in particular or to avoid it being about some specific relationships. I guess what I am saying is, I find sentimentality a very interesting thing, but I know that it is so dangerous to deal with. It is awful to make sentimental work, but it is not at all a terrible thing to be interested in sentimentality and sometimes the difference is not clear. Sometimes it is quite hard to make work that is focusing on some sort of sentimental engagements and for it not to be a sentimental work in itself. The easiest thing to do if you are worried about it then is to make a very cynical work of art. To say to viewers: Hey I am not being sentimental, I am making a work about sentimentality. But that also is not very satisfying at the end. It has got to be somewhere in-between. There is this very big grey area in-between that is the most interesting but also perhaps the hardest thing to deal with, with any clarity.

TA Is sentimentality really your primary interest? For example, if I look at your painting "Colonizer" I don't feel sentimental. For me the central aspect is the coincidence of closeness and distance. A recurring instrument you're using to create this illusion is the graphic grid in which you situate your figures. What can you tell about this staggering?

Edward Wright

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The interview was held on October 15,
2010 at Edward Wright's Studio in Kriens
near Lucerne.



EW It tends to put a distance between you and the emotional register of the work. I guess the idea is to encourage empathy in the viewer but block it at the very same time. One hand is extended out in a gesture of welcoming, and the other is held up as a kind of a barrier.

TA And that is maybe the point why you are especially interested in hands and arms.
In all the works I have seen they are in the centre.

EW Certainly in the last year or so I have been actually doing a lot more with the physical gesture of the arms. The action of the arms has become much more pronounced. In the past it was more about the hands. And that is why it looked more like traditional portraiture because the hands would be placed over people's arms, or on their shoulders or maybe around their waists or something as a kind of an indication of closeness and bonding and warmth. But done to excess, to a point where you find it ridiculous perhaps, or suspicious.

TA And the facial expression which is not corresponding with the hands. Another one of your paintings shows a group of businessmen. I can really feel this kind of expression, and also they touch each other with their hands. They are laughing, trying to be nice, and they are clearly touching each other but I do not believe them anything. What is it and how do you create this ambivalence?

EW The businessmen cycle of paintings was particularly good for that sense of false friendship and to explore emotional superficiality. In that sense those paintings were perhaps more about superficiality than they were about happiness. So the smiles were not indicating any true sense of happiness, rather they were indicating a lack of warmth and so they looked a bit fake. Whereas now I want to make work that is not so much about superficiality – oh by the way I used to think at the time, perhaps I still do, but I was thinking when I was making those earlier paintings that superficiality, emotional superficiality, was just as important as emotional depth. That was one of the ideas driving the work. We tend to disparage superficiality, we say that it is not good. We want people to be real with us but of course we need to be superficial, we can't always be true. To live together we have to have superficial relationships. That is the social contract I suppose. Everyone understands the code. We need to be nice to each other because some part of our brain is wired to react well to pleasing facial expressions. But we don't need to genuinely mean it, because if we meant it genuinely, we would be exhausted at the end of each day.

But I found that difference between depth and superficiality very interesting. I still do and I still think I am working with that although in a different way. So now it is more about violence, or aggression. It is about these pent-up emotions due to frustration with daily life.

TA Aggression and violence, are they superficial too? Or are they more real?

EW The emotional content is very stylized now. It is becoming – well, I mean it was before too – but the aggression that I depict in the paintings is stylized in order to distance you from it, in order for you to say I don't have to empathize with these people in the painting, I don't have to find this convincing because if I did, if this artist tried to be convincing, it would probably be really embarrassing.

TA You were already talking about your artistic interest in the issue of happiness. So, the German language has only one word for happiness, luck and fortune: "Glück". In its origins it means: how something turns out. Only at the very end can you say something along the lines of "now I am happy because it was good" or "the way to come here was right". In English, you make a distinction between "luck" and "happiness". Does this difference based on language make any difference for you while thinking about happiness?

EW I guess I have always been a bit confused by “Glück” because it also means luck. You know people say “viel Glück” when you are going to do something, like “Good luck!”. But then “glücklich” is happy. Actually, I don’t quite know how to use that word in German. I distinguish pretty clearly between fortune and happiness, and I don’t really think about fortune very much in relation to my work. I think about happiness. Perhaps what I think about is contentment as well. When I think of contentment then I think of long-term happiness, underlying happiness. As in, you are satisfied with your life or you are satisfied with some aspects of it. Whereas happiness to me may indicate a more immediate emotional state: I am happy right now because it is a sunny day, I am riding my bicycle and I feel good. It is not quite clear to me whether I am dealing with long-term contentment more or short-term happiness.

TA And another difference is also, I think, that one can influence things in a way that they go in the right direction, and fortune is more passive, it happens to me. The other is maybe more, well, not to have a plan, but to decide. You can decide to go this way or that way with an idea.

EW This is an aspect that I have not really thought about much, so I am not sure what to say. Having the ability to make decisions within your life that will cause your future happiness. I tend to perhaps be a little bit more interested in the present situation. What is wrong, what is going wrong and why aren’t I happy or why aren’t we happy if I am thinking more generally.

TA Because being happy is just a sudden feeling – but to be unhappy is already a sort of analysis.

EW Perhaps because unhappiness is some sort of pain, it is accrued and therefore you’re tempted to analyse it more than you would if you were happy. If you are happy you just accept being happy as a state of normality and you don’t need to be reflective. Whereas if you are unhappy you feel a need to correct it; there is a problem, therefore I must fix it. I think that is why I am interested in the balance between... for example I have a painting back there where on one side they are smiling and on the other side they are not, they look unhappy. It is about that recognition. This is why there is all that ambivalence in so many of the paintings. I put some sort of aggressive gesture in the picture but then I try and undermine that with a smile in the same picture to try and create a paradoxical situation without degenerating into chaos. If I wanted just to paint the chaos of our emotional lives I would probably be a really expressionistic painter. It is more about confusion than chaos. There is this state that we are always living in because we can’t really see ourselves and we can’t really see what we should be doing or what we’ve done wrong. Our egos tell us a different story. We have some self-awareness but we lie in order to protect ourselves. And if every person is doing that in a community or a nation, then you end up with strange outcomes collectively.

TA Let’s return to the grid briefly. It’s a structure that helps civilization. Your figures are all standing well on this fixed agreement between society and the individual. It seems that everything works well...

EW The grid is a controlling device.

TA Do you mean that the dialogue needs a kind of a constraint, that democracy needs constraint and that the staircase of might is well organized? Otherwise the idea of democracy won’t work. It is not a flat thing where everybody can do what he wants.

EW No, absolutely not, we need the hierarchy. Yet we can never be entirely happy with it because it always feels like it is not really serving us nor really representing us.

TA Does your work refer to a certain turning point of the human condition?

EW I think my work is showing this kind of drive to find a better solution, this drive to understand ourselves, or to find not only better political solutions but personal solutions.

But possibly the ambivalence and tension within the work is there because of the frustration of knowing that you can’t change things that much. At least not short-term. And here the difference or confusion between short-term and long term is relevant again. One could substitute the word happiness for politics. One does not seek solutions if they are considered truly unattainable.

TA This means that we are connected to the others and we can’t just leave.

EW That is right, I don’t often paint people on their own. I used to. When I lived in Australia I painted a lot of solitary figures and those were really repressed little paintings. They were really constrained by my own rules about what I had to do in fact. I was really like a person alone on an island, painting lonely figures.

TA We have divided all the artists’ works into the 8 fits of Lewis Carroll’s Story “The Hunting of the Snark”. Your paintings can be found in the fifth one. This is also interesting because of your works’ titles “Punchy feely” and “Friendshit”. Friendship in Carroll’s Story is less based on sympathy than on collective fear. The two protagonists connect because they feel the same in the same situation at the same time. That is a movement I can see in your work. My final question is based on this context: How far is fear an impetus and urge to your own personal search of happiness?

EW There is one aspect of fear, for sure, and it is related to moving away from home. I lived for a long time in Sydney and I was very comfortable there, I know it well and it is a great city to live in. You can have a very good standard of living there and I had plenty of good times in that city. Moving away was quite hard. I moved to New York in 1997 for a while to try living there. And actually I would have stayed but for a visa problem. Later, back in Sydney, I met my wife, who is Swiss, and suddenly had an urge to leave again. In fact only half of me wanted to be in Australia. The other half wanted to be in the northern hemisphere where all the art was being made that I found interesting. I had to decide between a comfortable lifestyle and my intellectual interests. My wife’s desire to pursue her own artistic career in Europe rather than Australia helped push me in the right direction. I feel like I am now living here permanently, but there is always the possibility that we might move back. I miss Australia terribly at times. Yet I have a fear about leaving here because I want to keep working as an artist. And it is going much better here than it ever did back in Australia. So I have a fear about leaving here that is connected to my career, and a fear about staying here that is connected to my personal life.



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